
A Natural History of the Gloucester Sea Serpent: Knowledge, Power, and the Culture of Science in Antebellum America

Author(s): Chandos Michael Brown

Source: *American Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Sep., 1990), pp. 402-436

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712941>

Accessed: 26-09-2015 04:52 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

A Natural History of the Gloucester Sea Serpent: Knowledge, Power, and the Culture of Science in Antebellum America

CHANDOS MICHAEL BROWN
College of William and Mary

IN THE AMERICAN EDITION OF HIS *INTRODUCTION TO GEOLOGY*, published in 1833, the English geologist Robert Bakewell paused in his discussion of the “progressive development of organic life” to consider the question of animal extinction. He concluded that such a force, even if it operated, could have little effect on the present-day disposition of the “higher animals.” Specimens which survived only in fossil form in Europe probably would appear someday in the yet unexplored southern latitudes. “I am inclined to believe,” he offered by way of example, “that the ichthyosaurus, or some species of a similar genus, is still existing in the present seas.” There was no doubt that some sort of creature had been sighted:

About sixteen years since, a large animal was seen for several summers in the Atlantic, near the coast of the United States, and was called the great sea serpent. Its appearance was frequently announced in the public journals,

Chandos Michael Brown is Associate Director of the Commonwealth Center for the Study of American Culture and Assistant Professor of History at the College of William and Mary. He is the author of *Benjamin Silliman: A Life in the Young Republic* (Princeton University: Princeton, 1989).

I must acknowledge the critical assistance of Susan Boudinot Whitlock, Ellen Fitzpatrick, Robert Gross, and Daniel Cohen—all of whom read and commented on the manuscript—and the fellows at both the Charles Warren Center, Harvard University, and the Society of Fellows, Columbia University—to whom I presented earlier versions of this essay.

American Quarterly, Vol. 42, No. 3 (September 1990) © 1990 American Studies Association

but the existence of the animal was for sometime disbelieved in this country. I am informed by Professor Silliman of Yale College, Connecticut, of whom I made inquiry, that many persons who attested the existence of the sea serpent from their own observations, were so highly respectable, both for intelligence and veracity, that their evidence could not be disputed.

Professor Silliman, editor of Bakewell's text, added his own note to this passage, expressing his continued disappointment that all attempts to kill or capture "these extraordinary animals" had failed, although he predicted eventual success: "the Eastern seamen, proverbial for their intrepidity and dexterity in hunting the whale, will yet bring in the sea serpent, or the animal, what ever it may be, that has borne that name."¹

Unexceptional by the standards of early-nineteenth-century scientific prose, this interchange is nevertheless richly significant. I will dwell at the start on the *language* employed by these two geologists, for it is in the categories and relationships established by their discourse that the cultural and intellectual import of the Gloucester sea serpent resides. In this essay, I describe a little known *cause célèbre* of 1817–1819, centered in the fishing town of Gloucester, Massachusetts, but familiar throughout the nation. For a brief moment, it appeared that American naturalists had established the existence of a new *genus* off the shores of North America—an accomplishment that simultaneously attested to the bounty of American nature and to the genius of American science. Ambitious and resourceful, these naturalists succeeded in introducing American evidence into the contemporary, largely European debate over the hypothesis of animal extinction. Wishing only to transform the relation of American science to the learned *savants* of the Old World, the Boston naturalists could not have anticipated that in the process they also would discover how precarious was their status in their own land. The episode further illuminates a peculiar feature of the practice of science in America: an activity shaped, in varying degrees, by the often conflicting claims of national pride and regional loyalty. Therefore, any *natural* history of the Gloucester sea serpent also must adumbrate the contest for cultural authority that engaged the attention of many American intellectuals during the formative years of the early republic.

One curious fact immediately begs attention. Neither author nor editor can claim to have *seen* the sea serpent—an unrelieved itch in the

taxonomic sensibility of the age. Somewhat reluctantly, Silliman ventured to correct Bakewell's classification of the beast. "An ingenious conjecture," he granted, though *conjecture* carried little weight in matters relating to natural history. More probably, it was a Plesiosaurus than an Ichthyosaurus, "as the short neck of the latter does not correspond with the ordinary appearance of the sea serpent." Yet how does Silliman know the "ordinary appearance" of a creature that he has not observed and that had never been described by a naturalist? As Bakewell declares, there were witnesses able to produce, in Silliman's words, "a mass of evidence, sufficient to establish any fact which is capable of being substantiated by human testimony." The emphasis here has shifted from the serpent, which stubbornly eludes exact description, to the *character* of those who swear to have seen it. Lacking the specimen, the testimony itself becomes the object of the naturalist's inquiry.²

Bakewell gallantly owns that the English were not disposed at first to accept the word of mere Americans—"the existence of the animal was for sometime disbelieved in this country"—and one detects sensitivity to this lack of faith in Silliman's rather defensive characterization of Eastern seamen as an intrepid and dexterous lot. If no example of the sea serpent had come before the bar of science, it was not the result of a flaw in the American character. To the contrary, Americans virtually alone had succeeded in establishing that the creature existed at all. Bakewell quotes approvingly from a letter published in the memoirs of Sir James Edward Smith in which James Goodenough, Bishop of Carlisle, concludes after reading a report of the mass sightings at Nahant in 1819 that "the famous American serpent is at length ascertained to be no fiction." This is faint praise, for what Goodenough deemed convincing was not the *quality* of the preceding descriptions compiled by the New England naturalists, but the *number* of the most recent observers: "It has been seen by three hundred people at once." He implicitly dismissed as fiction the best formal accounts that American naturalists had been able to produce, and to these I will eventually return.³

Bakewell's argument against extinction occupies an interesting, though minor, place within the geological debates of the early nineteenth century, but he did clarify three great issues for the American naturalists who were drawn to use or to teach from his text. It had

become generally evident that the record of geological strata, properly interpreted, indicated that the earth was older by far than any had dared imagine in the previous century. This important insight led to a serious enquiry, accelerated by the parallel development of paleontology and comparative anatomy, into the meaning of the fossil record, which, in turn, raised yet more disturbing questions about the history of life on earth. The most portentous of these revolved around the existence of certain animals, preserved in fossil form, that had no known living counterpart.⁴

The apparent disappearance of certain animal forms from the earth was vexing for still other reasons. Thomas Jefferson, no conventional Christian himself, stated his objections to an earlier theory of extinction as it appeared in the work of the French naturalist George Louis Leclerc, *Comte de Buffon*. Emboldened in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787) to contradict Buffon's assertion that "nature is less active, less energetic on one side of the globe than she is on the other," Jefferson included the giant Mammoth—the fossil remains of which recently had been discovered in Ohio—in his catalog of species indigenous to North America with this explanation: "Such is the oeconomy of nature, that no instance can be produced of her having permitted any race of her animals to become extinct; of her having formed any link in her great work so weak as to be broken." Both sacred and secular scripture—in this case the powerful metaphor of the great chain of being—proscribed the possibility that forms of life, once created, could be extinguished. Christians and Deists alike warily confronted the problem of the vanished *Megalonyx jeffersoni*.⁵

From his enviable position as Professor in the National Museum of Natural History in Paris, M. (Georges) Cuvier, in an influential essay of 1801, proposed a systematic plan of research to address this problem. Directing his remarks "aux savants et aux amateurs des sciences," he suggested three alternative hypotheses to account for the fossil record. The first merely reflected the competing theory of his colleague Lamarck: fossil creatures may have evolved in form so that their modern representatives bore only a generic resemblance. The second he stated more emphatically, for it corresponded to his own belief: fossils endured as the record of a whole world of creatures that lived and flourished and that catastrophically perished from the earth. Extinction, then, did operate as a force in nature. The final alternative Cuvier only partially

supported: fossil remains, he speculated, might mark the former presence of animals that had migrated elsewhere during long periods of geological pre-history. Much territory remained to be explored, he reasoned: "naturalists are still a long way from observing the totality; each time we discover a new unknown fish or shell we must continue to suppose that still other species yet live in far off seas or in the inaccessible depths."⁶

By 1817, although Cuvier had abandoned the expectation that fossil vertebrates might be found still wandering the interior plains of North or South America, he held fast to the hope that the impenetrable sea concealed marvels. The first is a regrettable development, as he expressed in the *Theory of the Earth* (1817): "no large species remain to be discovered in North America, as there is no good reason that can be assigned why any such should exist in that country with which we are unacquainted, and in fact none has been discovered there during the last hundred and fifty years."⁷ Yet the oceans resisted the naturalist's gaze, for ancient marine animals could cavort beyond or beneath sight in realms newly suitable to their survival. American naturalists—who for the most part shared Jefferson's belief that, in concert with the physical environment, the flora and fauna of North America contributed to the special character of the nation—were understandably reluctant to embrace Cuvier's first conclusion, even as they were inclined to exploit the possibility offered by the second.

Many persisted in the search for *animalia incognita*: dead or alive; and they followed with a kind of proprietary interest Cuvier's writing on the subject of extinction in the pages of the *Journal de physique*. They did not often participate directly in an expanding theoretical discourse revolving around the age of the earth and the origins of life, but curious Americans read of it in journals—which rapidly crossed the Atlantic—and their own work was shaped by the leading naturalists of England, France, and Germany, for whom they performed the invaluable service of collecting and describing specimens. American savants and amateurs did not invariably resent this auxiliary position. They viewed it as a necessary part of the Baconian enterprise of cataloging the contents of the planet; but naturalists were not immune to the nationalist impulse that propelled most forms of intellectual activity in the early Republic, and they chafed to contribute to the various scientific debates that then raged abroad. Paradoxically, one was most

certainly an *American* scientist when one succeeded in establishing a *European* reputation.

Yale Professor Benjamin Silliman, to give but one example, attained prestige among his own countrymen by publishing in France and in England an account of the fall of a meteor in Weston, Connecticut in 1807—a time when the origin of such stones was a hotly contested issue among Continental scholars. Frederick Hall, who would become professor of chemistry at Middlebury College, reported the reaction to Silliman's account when it was read before the "first class of the National Institution" in Paris. "I assure you," Hall wrote, "that I have never heard any thing which engaged more attention, or which appeared to be better received. Messrs. Fourcroy, Vauquelin, Berthollet, Laplace, Lagrange, Lapeire, Biot, Guy-Lussac [sic], &, indeed, almost all the distinguished *savans* were present & seemed highly gratified." Silliman's technique in "Note sur la chute d'un aërolithe à Weston" compared favorably with general practice on the Continent: "most of the American productions, which reach Paris, even those on the sciences, are written in a style of high bombast; in language indefinite, & often unintelligible. From these the French form an unfavorable idea of the state of learning in our country." In contrast, Silliman's account was "minute & simple, & therefore more credible & more suitable for the subject of this nature." When Secretary Pictet finished reading it, the response was enthusiastic: "I have heard from the *foule* of the literati, the expressions '*C'est une bonne relation.—Elle est bien faite.*'"⁸ Well made it may have been; common it was not.

Author Bakewell and editor Silliman both agreed that the capture and close examination of a sea serpent would create a great international stir among naturalists. This animal could be only one of two things: a living specimen of a fossil type or an entirely nondescript (in the original sense of having never before been described) creature of significant proportions. It also ought to be clear, however, that their motives were not exactly the same. The relation of editor to author accurately represents the status that American science, on the whole, enjoyed in the European mind, and Silliman's commentary to Bakewell's text is structurally of a decidedly subordinate character. Nevertheless, he challenged Bakewell's authority to identify the creature by proposing an alternative. Americans had seen the serpent, not the Englishman, and by rights the honor of naming it should go to those

who discovered, or, as was more common, those who correctly classified the species. This rather bland exchange—in the form of a footnote to a text—does not so much symbolize as embody the nagging preoccupation of American naturalists during the early national period. Sharing with Thomas Jefferson the virtually sublime confidence that the natural history of America was somehow more compelling, more robust, than that of Europe, they nonetheless were reduced to writing commentary, when every Republican instinct urged authorship.

The debate over the sea serpent had its beginnings in Gloucester Bay on August 10, 1817, when reports of a strange creature in the harbor began to circulate rapidly through New England. Accounts of the beast found their way into print practically before its wake had settled, and for three years the publicity did not slacken. William Bentley, the Pepys of Salem, recorded in his diary on August 15 that “we have heard from Gloucester that a Narway Kraken had visited their harbour within ten pound Island. We have had letter upon letter.”⁹ The sightings provoked dozens of newspaper reports, which appeared in all of the major cities along the Atlantic coast. The Linnæan Society of New England in Boston hurriedly appointed a committee to report on the appearance of this strange beast, which it rushed into print within weeks of the first sighting. General David Humphreys, once a member of General Washington’s staff and former Wicked Wit of Hartford, traveled at considerable expense from his villa in Humphreysville, Connecticut, to interview witnesses in Gloucester. These he immediately issued as a series of letters to Sir Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society in London. From New York, Constantine Rafinesque that “disciple of the ‘mighty Stagirite,’ ” enlightened the nation with a “Dissertation on Water Snakes, Sea Snakes and Sea Serpents.” William Dandridge Peck, Massachusetts Professor of Natural History at Harvard, remarking that “the appearance in this vicinity the last summer of an enormous animal of the serpentine order, is a fact . . . remarkable here, and . . . interesting to naturalists every where,” published his own version of the episode in the *Memoirs* of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Jacob Bigelow, Professor of Materia Medica in Cambridge, gathered the loose ends into an essay for Benjamin Silliman’s new *American Journal of Science, and Arts*. With keener humor and equal timeliness, the Charleston playwright William Crafts penned a satire: *The Sea Serpent; or, Gloucester Hoax: a Dramatic jeu d’esprit in Three Acts*.¹⁰

Following closely upon Bentley's diary entry, the *Boston Weekly Messenger* published under the heading "Monstrous Serpent" a brief compilation of the sightings. The creature's length was estimated variously at between sixty and seventy feet, or between fifty and one hundred feet. It appeared to have a girth "about the diameter of a barrel." It moved rapidly in a serpentine fashion (though this was disputed), and it turned instantaneously, doubling back upon itself. It appeared "to be full of joints and resemble[d] a string of buoys on a net, as set to catch herring." All attempts to kill or capture the creature failed, including musket shot at close range. Theories abounded as to the origin of the serpent and the cause of its appearance. The editor of the *Weekly Messenger* noted that it was widely supposed to have come into the harbor to feed upon "a very numerous shoal of herrings, which have lately appeared there," and concluded with the practical observation that "if he has been instrumental . . . in driving these herring into the harbour, he has rendered an essential service to the town."¹¹ It seemed also to bear a "strong resemblance" to a beast described in the *Memoirs* of the Wernerian Society as recently as 1810, and known widely as the "Stronssa animal" after the island in the Orkneys upon which the carcass was discovered.¹²

Whether a "Narway Kraken" or a cousin to the beast of Stronssa, the precise identity of the serpent remained obscure, for none who saw it could actually compare. It was common in such cases for learned gentlemen to commission a justice of the peace to take depositions from the observers. In what soon came to be the most commonly cited reference, the *Natural History of Norway*,¹³ Eric Pontoppidan, Bishop of Bergen, validated the principal account by embedding it within the baroque juristic language of a formal disposition in Norwegian. The witnesses "gave their corporal oaths, and, with their forefinger held up according to law, testified and declared the aforesaid letter of declaration, and every particular set forth therein, to be strictly true."¹⁴

Stimulated by newspaper bulletins and by receipt of the same "letter upon letter" that drew Bentley's attention in Salem, the Linnæan Society of New England called a special meeting on August 18, 1817, where it appointed a committee to "collect evidence with regard to the existence and appearance of any such animal."¹⁵ The Society grasped at this opportunity to impress the public with its expertise and moved aggressively to consolidate its claims upon any final description of the creature. It was important to act quickly, for in addition to the

international acclaim that would accompany a *scientific* description of the beast, the popular market for a pamphlet was very much a thing of the moment. Yet, the objectives of so peremptory an appropriation (as it was in effect) were, if not outright contradictory, at least more complex than these two suggest.

Recently established (1814), the Society drew members by its invitation only, from a comparatively small circle of scientific savants and amateurs who resided mainly in the vicinity of Boston. The Society was not purely local in membership, however. Its museum (and proudest accomplishment) was swollen by contributions from the hundred or so corresponding members scattered about the country and the world. Early in 1816, the overwhelmed Society moved the whole collection to a large hall situated above “the new south market house” in Boston and opened it to the public—at no charge—on Saturday. Nevertheless, only about twenty resident members attended the closed Saturday evening meetings where Jacob Bigelow or others might entertain themselves by narrating the experience of a trip to the White Mountains of New Hampshire, the “most remarkable mountains in the world.” While such “curious facts and ingenious observations”¹⁶ were characteristic of the Linnæan Society, the closed Saturday evening meetings and restrictive admissions policy ensured that few outside this privileged circle would hear the learned pronouncements. The Society did not seem to think that the Museum, which might have compensated for this exclusion, was worthy of its sustained attention (the collection was but indifferently arranged), while the expense of maintaining it grew in proportion to the size of the collection.

Treasurer Octavious Pickering, whose deep pocket qualified him for the post, eventually declined to pay Society debts from his own funds, and, upon his resignation in January, 1818, pointedly called for the minutes to reflect that he had “already been for a long time in advance of the Society to the amount of 12 or 14 dols.” “Mr. P.,” the Society’s receipt book confirms, “is weary of being importuned to pay demands against the Society when he has no funds in his hands for that purpose.”¹⁷ This financial crisis had loomed large in the Society’s deliberation even before Pickering’s defection. In an effort to recruit support, it hosted a dinner in June 1817 for the Governor and Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts, the President of Harvard College, and such State Senators who chose to attend. The members were elated when

the politicians, rendered expansive by good food and wine, spoke in vague terms of substantial government support: "the interest excited by this meeting gave the Society reason to believe, that the importance of their institution was fully appreciated, and that the public already felt disposed to protect and patronize it."¹⁸ When the sea serpent surfaced in Gloucester Bay two months later it was merely prudential to take on the very public role of investigating this curious phenomenon; for how else could the Society demonstrate the necessity of its own existence and at the same time justify a call for public support of what was, in essence, a gentleman's private club?

Society members, including the Honorable John Davis, Jacob Bigelow, M.D., and Francis Gray, commissioned the Essex County Justice of the Peace and former State Senator Lonson Nash to depose the most reliable witnesses of the sea serpent in Gloucester. They provided him with explicit instructions to "examine upon oath some of the inhabitants of that town with regard to the appearance of this animal, to make the examination as early as possible, to request the persons examined not to communicate to each other the substance of their respective statements, until they were all committed to writing: to have these statements signed and certified in due form, and sent to us." The Society also provided Nash with a list of twenty-five questions, to be used in the event that the statements omitted crucial information, such as whether the creature was serpentine or its "sinuosities vertical or horizontal?" For his part, Nash understood the instructions of the Society to mean that he need supply only the most consistent testimony. He deposed eight witnesses: three merchants, two ship-masters, a mariner, a ship-carpenter, and James Johnstone, Jr., "aged seventeen." All, Nash assured the committee, "men of fair and unblemished character."¹⁹

Nash admitted in his covering note that while the accounts differed in some of their "particulars, still, for the most part they agree." Here he is only partially correct. A composite view of the Gloucester sea serpent, reconstructed from the testimony presented to the Linnæan Society, includes the following attributes: its head "appeared much like the head of a turtle . . . and larger than the head on any dog." It was "something like the head of a rattlesnake, but nearly as large as the head of a horse" and "his mouth appeared like that of a serpent; the top of his head appeared flat." One witness swore that there "rose from his head or the most forward part of him, a prong or spear about

twelve inches in height, and six inches in circumference at the bottom, and running to a small point." Another was certain that the creature's head was "as large as a four-gallon keg," which contradicts a claim that it was about the size of the "crown of a hat." The sea serpent carried its head above water, though accounts varied as to the height from six inches to two feet. A similar disagreement centered on its exact configuration. Five of the witnesses maintained that the creature exhibited a distinct segmentation in the forms of "rings" or "bunches" along its entire length. One vowed that he counted at least fifty such divisions, though this number far exceeds any other estimate. Three depositions contradict this observation. Mariner Amos Story, who trained a glass on the beast from a distance of about twenty rods (320 feet), was certain that he saw no "bunches" on his back, and ship carpenter Matthew Gaffney fired a large musket ball at the creature's head from a distance of thirty feet without noting anything unusual about the shape of its spine.²⁰

The manner of the serpent's movement was of special concern to the Linnæan Society, and here the testimony shows evident signs of Nash's leading the witnesses or tampering with their statements. Solomon Allen vowed that the animal moved in a "right to left" motion and that it resembled a "length of chain" when it turned abruptly back on its course. The figure is apt and expressive. Eppes Ellery did not comment on the way in which the creature propelled itself, but he was certain that "the first part of the curve he made in the turning was in the form of a staple." Matthew Gaffney and merchant William B. Pearson concurred with Gaffney repeating this description word-for-word and Pearson omitted only the word "first" from an otherwise identical phrase. Despite the prompting, some difference of opinion persisted. Gaffney, who at thirty feet came closest to the creature, said that its motion was "vertical, like a caterpillar." Pearson witnessed Gaffney's shot, but he compared the serpent's movement to that of an eel, that is, on a horizontal plane.²¹

Conveying early in September its deep appreciation to Nash for his own efforts—"what you have thus accomplished will go far in giving some precise and accurate conception of the subject, peculiarly exposed to exaggeration and mistake"—the Society began preparation of its report. Nash was flattered by the attention, "not simply on account of the high consideration [he] entertain[ed] for the members of that laud-

able institution; but likewise for the agreeable, and respectable channel, through which their vote of thanks was communicated to me." Clearly the "respectability" of the enterprise and of those involved held some social allure. Nash quickly responded to additional requests for information and even forwarded an unsolicited account based on his own observations of the sea serpent on April 14. The most striking feature of Nash's testimony was the degree to which it conformed to the committee's expectations, which, on the mere evidence of its list of questions, were not difficult to discern. Observing the creature through a glass from a distance of about two hundred and fifty yards, he concluded that its length was, at a *minimum*, seventy feet and professed that he would not be surprised if it exceeded one hundred feet from head to tail. He stated with certainty that the motion of the creature was nearly vertical and that while underway, no more than seven or eight "distinct portions of him" were visible above the water "at the same time."²²

Whether conscious or not of his own influence on the testimony of those he deposed, Nash stoutly resisted any reciprocal cues from his countrymen. He took direct issue with Master Solomon Allen. The man, he informed the committee, was mistaken as to both the motion of the animal and the number of distinct portions visible at any given time. In fact, lacking only a mane, Nash's serpent resembled in shape and behavior that of Captain von Ferry as related in Pontoppidan and far exceeds in length any other estimate.²³ It is probable that he, at least, was familiar with the previous example, for the Linnæan Society already had resolved to incorporate an abstract into its own report, arguing somewhat disingenuously and almost certainly inaccurately that "the work of Pontoppidan is hardly known in this country and the extracts from it in the encyclopedia of Dr. Rees, and in Guthrie's Geography, state but a few of the peculiarities in which this coincidence is observed; and mingle with these few, several traits ascribed by Pontoppidan to a different animal, none of which agrees with any statement in our depositions."²⁴

Nash provided critical data validated by oath and by his own social position, but the Society cast a wide net among the corresponding membership in the hope of acquiring yet more information. "The subject is now of general interest among us," began one such inquiry; "and will probably be so abroad." The surge of interest created by the

August sighting encouraged still other witnesses to come forward, and the committee eventually assembled a sort of history of the sea serpent in America, with accounts, all from New England, dating to as early as 1780.²⁵ These, accompanied by the standard appendage of "duly authenticated" affidavits, the committee gathered together into a final report of twenty sections, fully intending to see it into print by the end of October 1817, a scant two months after the serpent's first appearance.

Had the Linnæan Society restricted itself to a mere collection of affidavits, the report would have circulated as an unexceptional example of natural history practiced at a distance from its source. It was a perfectly acceptable procedure to assemble such a document, make what one could of the testimony and set it adrift for the use of any who might later need such intelligence, so long as one avoided a Mandevillean excess of credulity. Instead, Gloucester presented the committee with yet another curiosity and an opportunity to exhibit more fully the character of scientific judgment in the United States. On September 27, 1817, the good citizens of Essex gathered in the ancient New England celebration of "training day." A group of "labouring people of Cape Ann" relocated the festivities to the beach, where, alarmed by the cries of a young child, they discovered an unusual serpent in the sand. "Many of the persons who saw the snake," swore Gorham Norwood before James Savage, J.P., "suggested that it might be the progeny of the Sea Serpent, which had been so much talked of, and which was said to have been seen near the cove, where this snake was killed." Thwarted so far in all efforts to capture the creature in the bay, the townsfolk understandably were excited by this new prospect—all the more when John Gott of Sandy Bay offered a handsome price for the specimen, which he, in turn, sold to an enterprising Captain Beach, also of Essex. The committee immediately halted publication of the original report and instructed Nash to depose all available witnesses, which he did with a customary thoroughness.²⁶

Plainly remarkable was the movement of the new specimen, which was unlike that of any other reptile: "his motion was vertical; his progress was very slow, not near so fast as a man ordinarily walks. His progressive motion was produced, by first contracting and then extending himself." Considerably intrigued to examine the internal anatomy of the creature, whose outward form exhibited a "row of protuberances along the back, apparently formed by undulations of the spine," the committee prevailed upon a reluctant Captain Beach to

allow them to conduct a partial dissection. This inquiry supported the startling conclusion that, while the form of the animal “approaches nearly to the *Coluber Constrictor* [a common blacksnake, which, as later became clear, it was]” in truth it was an altogether different animal. The clincher was the apparent physical advantage this peculiar arrangement of structure afforded the creature: “In regard to the use or final cause of the curvature in the backbone, which gives so peculiar a character to this animal; it is obvious that two important ends are effected by it. These are the increase of *flexibility* and an increase of *strength* in *vertical motion*.”²⁷ Here was proof positive that the creature stood apart from the order Reptilia, for the great Cuvier had pronounced that “the manner of articulation exemplified in the movement of the reptilian form, which, in general, executes on the side [from side to side], and not up and down, as the painters show.”²⁸ The suddenly enlarged report closed with a great flourish of learning and the near sacramental act of taxonomic classification:

Your committee considering this serpent as nondescript, and as distinct from other genera of serpents in the flexuous structure of its spine, have deemed it necessary to constitute a new genus, founded on this peculiarity. They have adopted the descriptive name of *Scoliophis* and have added the local specific name of *Atlanticus*. Compared with the genera of Linnaeus and Lacepede its character will stand thus:

SCOLIOPHIS.—*Scuta on the belly, scutellae on the tail, spine flexuous.*
Atlanticus. SCOLIOPHIS.

And thus the Society invented a whole new genus.²⁹

The conclusion of the report captured the relief of the committee, which seized the unexpected bonus of the snake and, through the force of rhetoric, not reason, established the relationship between *Scoliophis* and the larger sea serpent for the purpose of classifying the latter. Begging the question of whether the “*great Serpent, seen in the harbour of Gloucester, be the Scoliophis Atlanticus,*” the report followed an ill-conceived argument from analogy, “until a more close examination of the great Serpent shall have disclosed some difference of structure, important enough to constitute a specific distinction.”³⁰ The credibility of the witnesses and the physical specimen of the *Scoliophis* would have to serve as a basis for classification. Upon this shaky premise, then, the committee published its pamphlet of fifty pages, with two fine engravings illustrating the internal arrangement of *Scoliophis*. A London edition appeared early in 1818, and the Society, as well as

other interested Americans, awaited the response of their naturalist colleagues abroad.

The Linnæan Society successfully attached its name to the Gloucester Serpent, but the headlong rush to promote that connection exposed it to ridicule, gentle and otherwise. In Salem, William Bentley, who closely followed published accounts of the sea serpent, noted the capture of *Scoliophis*. "This has created a great interest & filled all our gazettes," he wrote at the close of the 1817 season; "everything of this kind is referred to our Linnæan Society, which at present is like Darwin's Litchfield Botanical Society, a man & his friends or without them, but first heard of by name & not by works."³¹ Even so, the Society could not maintain its monopoly on the creature. Captain Beach was said to have commissioned a portrait of the serpent, which he put on display in Gloucester, presumably together with what now was billed as the progeny of the Great Sea Serpent. A Mr. Penniman of Boston, the very same "who took a likeness of the Otter or Anco sheep while living," had contrived to exhibit a painting "20 by 10 feet, of Gloucester harbour, in which the sea serpent is represented as he appeared between Wind-Mill Point and the Fort," and the appearance of David Humphreys in Cape Ann on August 29 foreshadowed yet another pamphlet on this "Monstrum Horrendum Ingens."³²

General Humphreys could lay reasonable claim to the status "amateur des sciences," although by 1817, true American *savants* had begun to grow jealous of their professional venue. Humphreys had published an essay, "On a New Variety in the Breeds of Sheep," in the *Transactions* of the Royal Philosophical Society, and on this subject he was genuinely well informed.³³ This credential alone did not entitle him to recognition as a man of science, however. Writing from Europe nearly a decade earlier, Frederick Hall registered with dismay that "by his own request" Humphreys had been elected a member of the Royal Society. "I can inform you," he told Benjamin Silliman, without concealing the sneer, "that F.R.S. is worth just £33.s13.p0."³⁴ Oblivious or indifferent to the effect it had on many younger naturalists, the General proudly affixed "*F.R.S.*" to his name and proceeded to direct a series of letters to Sir Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society, which he issued simultaneously in a neat edition.

Humphreys arrived in Gloucester in time to accompany Lonson Nash on his first round of deposition taking, and his account therefore partially duplicates this material. Yet the General's letters possess an

altogether different flavor—without seeming less accurate or more credulous—a point that ought to have caused the committee some uneasiness. Expressed in his own peculiarly *poetic* language—strongly influenced by the eighteenth-century verse of which he was fond—the whole episode assumes an air of theatricality, all the more pronounced because Humphreys portrays the chase as an epic drama. “*Who will dare to put a hook in his nostrils, transfix his sides with a spear, or engage in single combat with Vulcanian arms the monarch of the deep, in his own element?*” he inquires. A hero is close at hand: “The fishermen and whalemens, with which Cape Ann and Marblehead abound, may doubtless be reckoned in the class of the most bold, enterprising, and dexterous mariners in the world.” They were especially so when properly motivated, in this case by the “hope of having the glory of killing him, and finally with the certainty of being well remunerated for their expense and hazard, in case of victory, as more than 5000 dollars had been offered for the spoils of this Leviathan.”³⁵

He had little patience with the skeptics who deflated the size of the serpent or, worse still, who mocked their betters with sham accounts. The efforts of all serious men were undermined by the many “fictitious and contradictory” paragraphs in print. “It is a pity,” Humphreys lamented to Banks, “this passion for *hoaxing*, if I may use that vulgar, yet fashionable word, should have given such undue occasion for ridicule and incredulity.” Sadly such hostile accounts nearly outnumbered those of the sober-minded, and the General felt a need to apologize for the levity with which many Americans regarded the earnest efforts of the Gloucester mariners to capture the beast: “among the fabulous and romantic *tales* which went into circulation, *one* was, that the monster had been caught, and that three men, including myself, had been killed and several wounded in the conflict.” Perhaps imprudently, considering that Banks would have to weigh the relative merit of the evidence, he sent a packet containing a dozen clippings from newspapers, “some true, some false, and others burlesque and ludicrous.” To make light of the beast and its pursuit was to diminish the courage of the hunters and, more disturbingly, to court irreverence, a peril he made clear in his allusion to the humanity’s first confrontation with a snake:

How far enmity placed between the *seed of Woman* and the *seed of the Serpent*, has been extended from the land to the water; or how much cunning

and ferocity this stupendous variety of that venomous family possesses, we may probably learn should he ever be provoked to combat, agonized with pain, and prompted to revenge of injury, to put forth the wonderful powers and energies with which the Almighty Author of Being has undoubtedly endowed him.

The present chase was in a sense a vindication, so Humphreys seems to imply; by capturing this creature in its own habitat, the children of Eve and Adam would recover something of a wisdom once possessed, but long lost.³⁶

While the tone of the *Letters* is distinctly literary, the text is studded with common sense observations notably absent from the avowedly plain-style report of the Linnæan Society. Humphreys alone notes the phenomena of “*looming*,” in which “owing to the state of the atmosphere, or the point of view, the same floating spar appears sometimes 40, and at others, 100 feet long.” This provides a reasonable explanation for the discrepancy in the observed size of the serpent. Humphreys, as well, was perfectly sensible of the distortion introduced into the testimony by what was, in effect, Lonson Nash’s translation of the eye-witness accounts. He mentions explicitly the disjunction between the language of the educated elite and that of the mariners and working people whose depositions were critical to both his own account and that of the Society:

If writing to any literary and scientific man, with whose candour I was unacquainted, I should fear to incur the charge of making use of the gossiping style, by relating the substance of the stories told with great simplicity and apparent truth by the women and children who had the best advantage for viewing him. . . . To you, my dear sir, I venture without hesitation to repeat what they said, as much as I can in their own phraseology, viz. “that he seemed to them an awful-looking, shocking, great, black, creature—with a head almost as large as a horse’s—with frightful, glaring eyes, nearly as big as the rim of a middling-sized tea-cup—his tongue and tail being like a snake’s—his motion in diving and playing quick as lightning—that they shuddered with fear in beholding, yet could not help looking at him as long as he continued in sight; and that he had something rough and sometimes shining all over his body.”

The breathless velocity of this description rings true and is a testament to Humphreys’s keen ear for the rhythms of common New England speech, but its very accuracy calls into question the contrastingly homogeneous language of the “respectable characters” upon whose un-

varnished word depended all knowledge of the creature.³⁷

It is a mistake, however, to read the letters merely as a competing account, for they attempt no closer version of the truth than the logic of the narrative allows. Literature constituted Humphreys's primary frame of reference, not science, and the plot of the *Letters*—one may plausibly speak of such a thing—balanced on a single conceit. “The spirit of inquiry and research has gone forth,” he wrote in the last of his letters to Sir Joseph; “simultaneous exertions are making in various parts of the United States.” Gentlemen had pledged vast sums for the skin preserved in its entirety: “*Success* would stamp it, as one of the most noble achievements in the annals of zoology. It would, indeed, be a proud *victory*, and not the less useful in the present more polished and enlightened state of society, than *those* of Hercules, in the rude and fabulous age in which the renowned hero flourished.” Approaching seventy in the year before his death, the old general had devoted nearly fifty years of service to the Republic as soldier, statesman, poet, and entrepreneur, and he shared with the Linnæan Society the desire that all credit should fall to Americans for the capture of the sea serpent. The revolutionary exploits of his own generation already had acquired the comforting luster of epic immortality, and Humphreys sensed that the serpent, too, offered an opportunity to enlarge the national mythology.³⁸

Humphreys did not fear learning, but he was decidedly a pious man in the fashion of his close friend and contemporary the Rev. Timothy Dwight, President of Yale. Caution tinges the ostensibly heroic plot of the *Letters*. Even in calling for the capture of the beast, he emphasizes the *limited* utility of knowledge. Only one actuality will emerge from close study of the sea serpent and its internal anatomy—“by what invisible springs, admirably contrived and adapted by the wisdom and omnipotence of the Creator to his internal structure and mechanism, a body of such weight and length, destitute, as it appears to be, of limbs, members, organs, fitted (according to our limited conception) for such rapid movement and revolution.” He warns that, when at last the serpent should come beneath the knife of a “skillful anatomist,” we must not “be too sanguine in our expectation, that the secret economy of nature in the organic system of an animal so *fearfully and wonderfully made*, will be fully disclosed to our feeble, and, perhaps, incompetent comprehension and understanding.” The physical globe resists the encroachment of intellect. The *Letters* predict disappointment

to all who imagine that nature is comprehensible in its entirety: "it must be acknowledged that, we have but imperfect *data* for calculating the devious course of such an erratic *Being*; until lately concealed from human view, perhaps for ages, in the dark and unfathomable abyss of *ocean*, among the unsearchable secrets of the GREAT DEEP."³⁹

However precise the judgment of the Linnæan Society—or of any other organization of savants, for that matter—such creatures as the Gloucester Sea Serpent were ultimately beyond the keening of mere humanity, for they symbolized in their elusive structure all that was mortal ("limited conception," "incompetent comprehension") in our perception. The secret "oeconomy" of nature was, after all, the living signature of God, which must remain forever beyond the grasp of science whether motivated by love of nation or by personal pride. Humphreys hesitated, even while he exhilarated in the pursuit of the serpent. By training and habit, he passed too easily into that figural space in which the hunt for the sea serpent reenacted the original encounter in the biblical Garden; and a nation might be cast out from Paradise as readily as Eve and Adam. He recalled the words of the primer, as the younger naturalists well may have forgotten: "In Adam's fall / We sinn'd all." This chastened skepticism stood in quiet rebuke to the emphatic claims of the Society, which represented, if anything, the contemporary excess of Enlightenment that so tormented the old Federalists of Humphreys's age and persuasion. Humphreys and the Society inhabited nearly separate worlds of understanding, sensibility, and experience. Sir Joseph, who in London occupied a planet of his own, did not venture to comment on the pamphlet—at least in print—and the *Philosophical Transactions* declined to notice the General's communication.

The serpent season opened in August 1818 amid a flurry of sightings; the Rev. William Bentley mustered only faint enthusiasm. Reward notwithstanding, the concerted professional efforts of the dexterous and intrepid mariners of the Cape Ann had come to nothing, and a partially dissected snake, coiled in a jar of spirits, did not a monster make. "We have not only our curiosity to prompt us but our pride as the subject is that of laughter, particularly in the Southern states," Bentley complained to his diary. All fame and honor aside, local dignity was now at stake. New England had to produce a specimen of the full-sized beast.⁴⁰

On September 10, the *Boston Weekly Messenger* published without a heading a terse account of a fish taken by one Captain Rich and on exhibition in Boston. It was, editor Nathan Hale supplied, a "Thunny, or Horse Mackerel." To the question, was this "the monster so often described as a Sea Serpent," he answered a decisive, "no." Hale did not deny that the "descriptions which we have had this season of the Serpent, have been less consistent and satisfactory, and undoubtedly often exaggerated," but he staunchly upheld the credibility of the previous year's reports; "neither these descriptions nor the error of persons who by mistake have been pursuing what had nothing of the remarkable and characteristic appearances of the Sea Serpent, ought to lead us to suspect all former testimony." Without attributing the source, he reminded readers that Cuvier had pronounced *Scoliophis* a "serpent *sui generis*," and he concluded rather lamely that "the circumstance that no other of the kind has been satisfactorily examined renders it probable that its residence is in the water, where it eludes the detection of the naturalist." Clearly something had alarmed those who believed that the report of the Linnæan Society was authoritative.⁴¹

The story emerged in its entirety in the following issue of the *Messenger*, where Hale, conceiving it as "a duty we owe to Capt. Rich as well as our readers," published a statement submitted by the Captain, but not before recapitulating all the evidence in support of the committee's published conclusions. Equating doubt with moral assassination, Hale left it to his audience to determine whether the testimony contained in the Society's report, "made deliberately on oath by men of respectability, is utterly false and groundless." He directed the argument away from the actual evidence surrounding the creature and toward the issue of the witnesses' characters. If their accounts were doubtful, he challenged, "we should be glad to know on what grounds human testimony is to be credited." Again without attribution, Hale introduced an extract from a letter of Sir Joseph Banks, who had wisely refrained from any public response to Humphreys's pamphlet. The President of the Royal Society admitted initially to "some grave doubts on the subject," but was now converted, according to Hale, by the Linnæan Society report. Sir Joseph forecast that the serpent would attempt to lay its eggs on the Gloucester beach and conveyed his further expectation "that the brave Americans who were unable last year to find the monster in their cruise for the purpose of harpooning him,

will be more successful this year." Forewarned by this parade of heavy artillery, readers may have expected a bombshell. They were not disappointed.⁴²

Captain Rich directed the capture of the sea serpent with a level head. He employed as his crew men of "respectability and integrity," and he sought out and hired eight previous witnesses of the serpent, explaining simply: "I hired such men, in order that I might not be deceived, should he make his appearance, having never seen him myself." He analyzed the committee report carefully (and with greater rigor than many who professed to more learning) and determined that the creature appeared generally when the water was in a dead calm. Accordingly, he chose such a day to place his boat where the beast most recently had been sighted. This careful preparation was rewarded with the "much wished for sight of the appearance of the Serpent." Rich took pains to record his impressions exactly: "my crew all agreed to a man, that what we then saw was the *supposed Serpent*, which had been seen both at that place and at Gloucester Harbour—I was perfectly satisfied, so precisely did it answer to the description that had been given of him—and had I never approached nearer, I could, with satisfaction to my own mind, have given testimony upon oath, that I had seen a Serpent not less than one hundred feet in length." In this alone, his and the crew's testimony equalled any reprinted in the published *Report*, but Rich did not stop there. "We did not keep at a distance *and wonder at what we saw*," he went on in a not so subtle jab at the savants; "our object was to take it if possible."⁴³

This chase, proving a difficult matter, continued—with the quarry in clear sight—until gradually it became apparent that the creature they pursued was considerably less exotic than any had supposed. "It was some time before we could discover the deception," Rich conceded, "but by following it up closely we have ascertained that the supposed Serpent, is no other than the wake of such a fish as we have taken." It was really no mystery how the illusion operated once the mechanism became plain. The Captain noted correctly that the serpent had "never been seen except in calm weather, when the surface of the water appears white & smooth, he then making his appearance moving with uncommon velocity, heaving up little waves of the true colour of the ocean, that appear at a little distance like what has already been described." Armed with this insight and his own dogged will, Rich finally managed to haul his prey aboard after a pursuit of five days.⁴⁴

The Captain kept the fish under wraps (literally folded in a sail) until it was positively identified, but he was convinced that he already had solved the puzzle of the great sea serpent, as were a number of Gloucester residents. Rich astutely compared their shore-based observations with his own and swore that "all" with whom he spoke "agree in the opinion . . . that this fish has caused many of the opinions that have been given of the *supposed* Serpent." Those who could compare sightings from a distance believed that Rich had taken the serpent. More importantly, his crew was convinced that they had run the monster to deck, and "its existence on this coast," the Captain concluded with the smugness that comes with certainty, "has been in part, founded on testimony they have given." Nathan Hale and other promoters of the beast hardly could contradict him. Instead they attempted to impugn the credibility of his witnesses. Whatever motive guided this strategy, it had little to do with establishing a *fact* of natural history.⁴⁵

For reasons less related to professional than to local or personal interests, only thin applause greeted the Society's classification of *Scoliophis*, even from within their own ranks. Circulation of the Rich account hardly added to the clamor. In New York, Constantine Rafinesque had responded to the first reports of the serpent by raising some general doubts about the practice of natural history in the United States. He prefaced his own "Dissertation on Water Snakes, Sea Snakes, and Sea Serpents," with a broad condemnation of his fellow naturalists: "Whenever a singular phenomenon, or an extraordinary natural occurrence, happens to be observed in the U.S.: whether spots in the Sun, huge fossil bones or sea serpents, a crowd of superficial writers hastens to offer us, instead of facts, their own ideas and conjectures on the subject, which prove, sometimes, more or less ingenious; but often wild, incorrect, or ridiculous." On the strength of no more information than had reached the New York papers, Rafinesque ventured to offer his own description of the beast. He believed, for instance, that the serpent was "covered with long scales in transverse rows . . . with teeth like a shark; the tail is compressed, obtuse, and shaped like an oar." If indeed this were its structure, he declared, the "Massachusetts Sea Serpent," was "evidently a real Sea-Snake, belonging probably to the genus *Pelamis*." Having established the genus, it was a simple matter to place the beast among the *Pelamis megophias*, "which means great sea-snake *Pelamis*," although Rafinesque admitted to some caution in the matter of exact definition. The long scales, he

thought, might indicate a “peculiar genus,” in which case the name of “*Megophias monstruosus* might have been applied.”⁴⁶

More openly than the Linnæan Society, Rafinesque addressed the prospect of reports circulating among European *savants* and, with unintentional irony considering his own method, alerted Americans to the risk attending any hastily assembled account. Such products, he told readers of the *American Monthly Magazine and Review*, “often contribute to render contemptible the subject of their inquiries, at least toward the vulgar, while it would otherwise become at all times deeply interesting; and should their crude speculations ever reach Europe, they will certainly afford very unfavorable specimens of our knowledge and attainments in sciences.”⁴⁷ In this conclusion, if not in his classification of the serpent, he was absolutely correct.

Alerted finally by the sheer volume of American accounts, Henri de Blainville bestirred himself as editor of the prestigious *Journal de physique* to review the report of the Linnæan Society in an essay entitled “Sur en nouveau genre de Serpent, *Scoliophis*, et le Serpent de mer vu en Amerique en 1817.” He abstracted, but refrained from commenting on, the various descriptions of the serpent itself. Instead, he devoted the greater part of his essay to the Society’s classification of *Scoliophis*, which he regarded with thinly concealed contempt. In Blainville’s judgment, the deformation of the spine in the specimen illustrated in the Linnæan Society report would not provide for the vertical movement attributed to it by witnesses. Nothing but the defect of the transverse process (“apophyse transverses”) distinguished the structure of the vertebra in *Scoliophis* from those of the ordinary snakes depicted in Cuvier’s *Leçons d’Anatomie comparée*, although, Blainville dryly admitted, the American report, in suggesting the contrary, may have contained an “erreur typographique.”⁴⁸

Blainville openly derided the Society’s effort to link *Scoliophis* with “le fameux Serpent marin” of which “there was so much talk in America.” He noted decisively that not a single naturalist had observed the creature and that no one had seen it at close range. He called attention to those parts of the testimony that generated internal contradiction: the considerable variation in the described length, the distance of the observers from the object, the wide discrepancy in the perceived shape of the creature. He completely dismissed the notion that the serpent was composed of articulated “bunches.” His language

became scornful at times: "Its head, which resembles a rattlesnake's, or a turtle's, was they say, as big as a horse's. Its mouth was, they say, like a snake's, and several mariners imagined a tongue, 12 feet long and 6 fingers in diameter at the root, tipped with a barb, coming out of it. Its eye was as large as a cow's." These "particulars," Blainville concluded, "are often contradictory," and the Society's contention that *Scoliophis* "is not only the same genera as the great Sea Serpent but is probably one of its young," seemed to go far beyond what the evidence warranted, especially given the quality of the testimony. Its science became yet more suspect ("commence à être plus douteux") when members proposed to class the serpent among the *Scoliophis*—even accepting that *Scoliophis* constituted a species at all, which Blainville did not. Offended by the supposition, he rejected utterly the idea that so large a creature would come to land to lay its eggs. In this biting critique, the worst fears of American naturalists seem to have materialized. A prominent European savant simply rejected their findings.⁴⁹

In New England, at least, they were undaunted. In spite of Rafinesque's protests, Rich's discovery, and Blainville's caustic attack to the contrary, the newspapers and enlightened folk of New England preferred to believe in their giant sea serpent. This faith was again gratified late in the summer of 1819. Marshal James Prince, en route to visit his family at the beach resort in Nahant, was fortunate to have with him his "*famous mast head spy glass*." Attracted to a great crowd gathered on the beach, he witnessed the thing gambolling in calm water about one hundred and fifty yards off shore. His description generally matches those included in the Linnæan Society Report and clearly was influenced by it. The *Boston Weekly Messenger* published this account, together with a similar one by Samuel Cabot, Jr., of Boston, who had traveled to Nahant for the sole purpose of viewing the Gloucester serpent. Cabot was prepared to confirm earlier sightings, as he informed his father-in-law Thomas Handasyd Perkins: "My first reaction after the animal was gone, that the idea I had received from the description you gave of the animal you saw at *Gloucester*, in 1817, was perfectly realized in this instance; and that I had discovered nothing which you had not before described. The most authentic testimony given of his first appearance there seemed to me remarkably correct; and I felt as if the appearance of this monster was already familiar to me." Cabot

was concerned less with describing the creature as such than he was with confirming the character of the previous witnesses. The intellectual process of "discovery," he implied, was secondary to the social imperative of preserving the boundaries of the "familiar."⁵⁰

"It is easier to believe that two Yankee professors could lie than to admit that stones could fall from heaven," President Thomas Jefferson is supposed to have remarked when presented with Benjamin Silliman's report on the Weston Meteor in 1808.⁵¹ Jefferson had his own notion of what laws obtained in heaven, and it was easier to question character than to change one's mind. Ten years afterward, William Bentley squirmed uncomfortably under the still incredulous gaze of Southerners, who had come to view the sea serpent as a peculiarly New England obsession. They were not impressed by Yankee depositions, he wrote in his journal, and Southern newspapers openly jeered the continuing reports of an enormous beast repeatedly sighted but never captured. This disbelief found full expression in a play composed by the Charleston playwright William Crafts in 1819, which captures in the satiric movement of its own plot the greater dramas that preceded it: the thoughtless boosterism of New England culture and the self-serving promotion of the Linnæan Society, the heedless nationalism of American naturalists, and finally, the consequences of an ill-considered quest for knowledge. *The Sea Serpent; or, Gloucester Hoax: A Dramatic jeu d'esprit in Three Acts*, like David Humphreys's *Letters to Sir Joseph Banks*, stands slightly outside of the colloquy conducted among the *savants des sciences* but responds at the same time to related concerns.

The Sea Serpent is itself purely a topical work, responsive in its timeliness to the largely unrecorded popular reaction to the phenomenon of the Gloucester Sea Serpent. From his chair at Harvard, William Dandridge Peck could wish piously for the capture of the beast: the serpent provided "an opportunity of completing our knowledge of so interesting a link in the chain of animated beings."⁵² In Charleston, this sort of sententiousness was fodder for wit. In a similar fashion, the play inverts the whole of the Linnæan Society Report. The dramatist singles out precisely those elements of the elite response to the serpent that appear, in his view, most characteristic of social status and regional identity.

A native Charlestonian, Crafts nonetheless was well situated to dramatize the interior history of the Massachusetts sea serpent. He graduated

from Harvard College in 1805 and by chance was in Cambridge for Commencement in August 1817, when the first reports of the Gloucester beast reached town. He was able therefore to observe the reaction of the locals first-hand.⁵³ Crafts was certainly familiar with the committee report and with the 1818 account of Captain Rich, which he may have had before him as he wrote. These provided details for the dramatic premise of the play—that the serpent is a hoax designed to promote the reputation of the town. In the play, Justice Portly, who secures affidavits from the witnesses, expresses this view, and the Mayor of Gloucester endorses it:

Justice: Let Salem boast her museum, and her witches
 Her statues Newb'ry, Marblehead her riches—
 We from them all the shining now will take,
 The snake and Glo'ster, Glo'ster and the snake!
 Mayor: To Boston, famous for its men of sense,
 Post we immediate this intelligence . . .
 Consult the learned, send a painter down,
 To take the likeness of the snake and town.

Local chauvinism only reflects in miniature, however, the larger cultural aspirations of New England. Timothy, a mariner who has seen the creature in the harbor, attributes the keenness of his vision to environmental influences:

'Tis so with all New-England's gallant race,
 Eager to learn, investigate and trace
 The world around them—knowledge is their aim,
 Hence is their happiness, and hence their fame.

This perception, Crafts satirically implies, is but a subset of the national character. In a proclamation announcing the reward for the capture of the sea serpent, Timothy reads that the successful mariner will acquire more than a fortune:

Moreover, he shall have New-England's thanks,
 An honored mention to Sir Joseph Banks;
 His vessel, too, for such marked resolution,
 Shall moor 'long side the frigate Constitution.

Already the frigate, with Mount Vernon, had come to represent a national symbol of resolute independence. In this light juxtaposition,

Craft penetrated directly to the anxiety hidden in Silliman's later footnote to Bakewell's text—that American science was still a provincial tributary to the European mainstream.⁵⁴

Neither does the Linnæan Society fare well at the playwright's hand. The witnesses manipulate poor Justice Portly—modelled on Lonson Nash—and while it is doubtful that Crafts had read Blainville's demolition of *Scoliophis*, he possessed sufficient common sense to reach his own conclusions. Within the play, the deposition of the witnesses reflects the deep social distinctions that are implicit in the committee report but never stated outright. Repeatedly the Justice surprised by the wisdom of the common mariners and mates. "A scholar and a mariner combined / A pretty kernal in a rugged mind," he remarks in astonishment after hearing a classical allusion. "This sailor is intelligent I see, / And navigates his tongue most cunningly," he is forced to concede, when yet another witness "bests" him in a verbal exchange. Yet savants do not easily accept instruction from mariners. Dismissing the obvious honesty of the witnesses, Justice Portly instead makes a fetish of the deposition, turns away from the sailors, and cries out:

For sceptic appetites I'll make a feast
One thousand affidavits at the least . . .
Let a new sign upon my door appear:
Snake! Snake! Snake affidavits taken here!

After Timothy captures the small serpent on the beach and, preserving it in "best New-England rum," gives it to the Mayor, he, in turn, quickly forwards the specimen to Boston, comforting himself with the thought—which also actuated the Linnæan Society in its quest for public support—that notoriety can be its own reward: "Still we have our pennyworth of fun / A little snake is better far than none." Eager to promote the status of Gloucester, the Mayor willingly exaggerates the significance of the evidence.⁵⁵

He is no more content than the Society with this diminutive example of a great beast and, like the committee, urges an argument from analogy to a much larger and impressive creature. He summons a painter from Boston—as actually happened—to paint a portrait, and his instructions to the limner parody the illogic of the final pages of the *Report*:

Justice: I think the point in issue is the snake,
Whose likeness *in extenso* you must take.

You've seen the young one and these writings here,
 With oral narratives you will compare—
 Aiding them all, with what yourself shall see,
 And then you will achieve the prodigy.
 Mayor: Here is another glass that magnifies
 Let Glo'ster seem at least of giant size;
 As to the snake.

No fool, the painter accommodates these requests and interjects suggestions of his own:

Your wishes let me know.
 It is not prudent to o'erbend the bow,
 So make him large, but give him room to grow:
 And whatso'er his stature you ordain,
 Why make the city half as big again.

The end result, naturally, is that the portrait enlarges the self-esteem of the town, as well as the size of the serpent; but neither image bears much likeness to reality, nor, by satiric association, does *Scoliophis atlanticus*.⁵⁶

Beneath the burlesque, as in the case of the interchange between Silliman and Bakewell that began this essay, lurks a more serious consideration of what, exactly, is at stake in the pursuit of knowledge in America. Silliman seems to have believed in the existence of the Gloucester Sea Serpent as it was described by men who were in some instances his friends and acquaintances. He had to choose between Captain Rich's claim and theirs, but he could not doubt the creature without at the same time doubting their word, and the social compact of which he was part forbade this particular exercise of skepticism. He also was constrained, not unwillingly, by the peculiar context of the event, which, in his conception of it, came to hinge on a point of both regional and national honor. As editor of the *American* edition of Bakewell's *Geology*, he could not let a perceived slight pass without comment, though wisely he refrained from elaborating more than was absolutely necessary. As a dedicated reader of the *Journal de physique*, Silliman both knew of and had to respect Blainville's judgment in the matter of *Scoliophis* and hardly could have escaped a small frisson of embarrassment. Crafts, too, cannot conceal a certain unease, which in *The Sea Serpent* takes the form of an exchange between the characters "Linnaeus" and "Scepticus."

According to the stage directions, this dialogue occurs "inside of a

Museum," a setting that well symbolizes the intellectual state of natural history early in the nineteenth century and that may refer indirectly to the circumstances of the Linnæan Society itself. Scepticus runs through a long list of scientific hoaxes famous in England but saves his sharpest jibes for his countrymen, though supposedly they "are men of more extensive parts." Satirizing both Jefferson and the American penchant for discovering giantism in nature, he emphasizes how trivial are most such claims of exceptionality:

Infants, with us, in sciences excel,
As ZERA COLBURN'S relatives can tell;
Nature, too, here, is bigger far by half,
See the boy LAMBERT, and the Westbrook calf;
The latter honor'd by the good opinion
Of the great chief of our immense dominion.

Linnaeus drives home the point in the opening lines of his own apostrophe to science. "Cause and effect like shrimps on shrimps depend," he responds, and concludes with virtual nonsense:

The Cambridge telescope I'll straitway borrow,
And go and take a squint at him to-morrow.
To men of science what discernment's given!
Astronomers discover fish in heaven.

In his eagerness to *possess* the serpent (by *fixing* it in his museum), Linnaeus in fact abandons all discernment, and with that his claim to status as a true man of science. Neither astronomer nor naturalist, he is, finally, a fool.⁵⁷

When at the end of the play the serpent is revealed to be a "*Horse-Mackerel, or some fish, as much like the Snake as can conveniently be procured*," each of the principals—as convention demands—delivers a brief moral summary. Linnaeus is chastened by the revelation of his own willful misapprehension and cautions others, in the fashion of Francis Bacon, to

Deem nothing true that is not proved—nor then
Believe it all—but doubt and doubt again
Falsehood's a floating superficial thing,
but truth is deeper than the deepest spring.

General Humphreys pursued the beast with gusto, but all the while the old man wondered whether in the search for *animalia incognita* they

might not all be trespassing into a territory that ought better be left unexplored. The Mayor, on the other hand, lamented the precipitous decline that will follow in the wake of the discovery of the hoax: "A short lived fame on Glo'ster he has shed. . . . What is there left to signalize the town?" Justice Portly misses already his affidavits; but Seraphina, the daughter of Linnaeus, has the final word, which she addresses to the Linnæan Society and to other impetuous naturalists of the young Republic, who in their desire to impress merely court humiliation:

So fares it always with the advent'rous race,
Who banish nature—and give monsters place;
Imagine miracles without their need,
Look wise in fancy—but are dupes indeed.

In this critique of a science driven by cultural chauvinism and misdirected national pride, which must have pleased him more than it could any conceivable audience for the play, Crafts demonstrated why his contemporaries thought him to be "one of the most brilliant *belles lettres* scholars who ever passed through [Harvard]." ⁵⁸ He understood New England culture as well as Professor Benjamin Silliman but was not compelled to abide by its often contradictory directives. He shared Jefferson's keen appreciation of Yankee character without indulging in the Virginian's splenetic condemnation of it. The pity was that he chose to satirize—within the limited district of Charleston—rather than to engage his Northern brethren; so that when nearly three decades after his death in 1826 reports of the capture of a sea serpent by an American whaler reached England, they were greeted with outright disbelief. At his writing desk in Chester Square, Pimlico, paleontologist Gideon Mantell (discoverer of the *Iguanodon*) made only a cursory entry in his journal: "possibly an Enaliosaurian!—still more probable—a hoax—in other words a Yankee lie," by which he meant, simply, an American lie. ⁵⁹

NOTES

1. Robert Bakewell, *An Introduction to Geology: Intended to Convey a Practical Knowledge of the Science, and Comprising the Most Important Recent Discoveries*;

with *Explanations of the Facts and Phenomena which Serve to Confirm or Invalidate Various Geological Theories*, 2d. American ed. from the 4th London ed., ed. Professor B. Silliman (New Haven, 1833), 213–14.

2. Bakewell, *Introduction to Geology*, 214.

3. Ibid.

4. It is beyond the scope of this essay to consider the history of stratigraphy, paleontology, and kindred matters. See Martin Rudwick's definitive treatment in *The Meaning of Fossils: Episodes in the History of Paleontology*, 2d. ed. (New York, 1976), chap. 3, which provides background for my discussion. Nicolas Rupke offers a penetrating account of Buckland's work and its intellectual and cultural context in *The Great Chain of History: William Buckland and the English School of Geology (1814–1849)* (Oxford, 1983). Together with Martin J. S. Rudwick's *The Great Devonian Controversy: The Shaping of Scientific Knowledge among Gentlemanly Specialists* (Chicago, 1985), and James A. Secord's *Controversy in Victorian Geology: The Cambrian-Silurian Dispute* (Princeton, 1986), Rupke's work forms the backdrop against which any history of the earth sciences in the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century must take shape.

5. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, William Peden, ed. (Chapel Hill, 1955), 47, 53–54. Jefferson himself possessed many of the forty-four volumes of Buffon's original edition, published piecemeal from 1749 until 1804. Jefferson's contributions to the proto-history of American paleontology are accounted for in George Gaylord Simpson, "The Beginnings of Vertebrate Paleontology in North America," *American Philosophical Society Proceedings* 80 (1942): 130–88. See also John C. Greene, *American Science in the Age of Jefferson* (Ames, Iowa, 1984), chap. 11.

6. Rudwick, *The Great Devonian Controversy*, 114. Cuvier objected to Lamarck's theory on several points. His version of evolution required an almost infinite span of time, which no accepted geological theory could provide. There were no known examples of transitional forms in the fossil record (an absence that also bedeviled Darwin). Most important, Lamarck and Cuvier held fundamentally opposite views of the meaning of *species*. For Cuvier, an organism was a functionally stable entity; each of its parts was adapted to the peculiar nature of its existence. Lamarck, conversely, applied the concept more flexibly. As a category, *species* described more a phase of existence than a stable organic system. Every living thing "must change insensibly in its organisation and its form," he wrote in the *System of Invertebrate Animals* (1802); quoted in Rudwick, *The Meaning of Fossils*, 117–19.

7. Robert Jameson, *Essay on the Theory of the Earth, by M. Cuvier, with Mineralogical Notes and an Account of Cuvier's Geological Discoveries by Professor Jameson, to which are now added, Observations on the Geology of North America, by Samuel Latham Mitchill* (New York, 1818). Robert Jameson was Professor of Chemistry at the University of Edinburgh, and his multivolume text was used widely in the United States. Mitchill, editor of the *Medical Repository*, was a tireless promoter of studies in natural history, though by 1818 his star had reached its zenith. The American edition appeared one year after the first English translation of Cuvier's work. The French version circulated in the United States before Mitchill's edition became available.

8. Frederick Hall to Benjamin Silliman, 7 Apr. 1808, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. I discuss this episode in Silliman's career and the cultural roots of American science in *Benjamin Silliman: A Life in the Young Republic* (Princeton, 1989). The desire to join the European intellectual community only intensified when it was thwarted by the restriction in intellectual commerce caused by the Embargo and Non-intercourse

acts and the War of 1812. The early history of American learned societies is told by several scholars in *The Pursuit of Knowledge in the Early American Republic: American Scientific Societies from Colonial Times to the Civil War*, ed. Alexander Oleson and Sanborn C. Brown (Baltimore, 1976).

9. *The Diary of William Bentley, D.D., Pastor of the East Church, Salem, Massachusetts*, 4 vols. (Gloucester, Mass., 1962), 4: 471–72.

10. I discuss the newspaper and other ephemeral matter in a longer study of American sea serpentism currently in progress. For a few of the many accounts before 1821, see *Report of a Committee of the Linnæan Society of New England relative to a large Marine Animal supposed to be a Serpent, seen Near Cape Ann, Massachusetts, in August 1817* (Boston, 1817); David Humphreys, *Letters from the Hon. David Humphreys, F.R.S. . . . to the Rt. Hon. Sir Joseph Banks . . . Containing some Account of the Serpent of the Ocean, frequently seen in Gloucester Bay* (New York, 1817); Constantine S. Rafinesque, “Dissertation on Water Snakes, Sea Snakes, and Sea Serpents,” *American Monthly Magazine and Critical Review* 1, 6 (Oct. 1817): 431–35; William Dandridge Peck, “Some Observations on the Sea Serpent,” *Memoirs, American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 4 (1819): [86]–91; Jacob Bigelow, “Documents and Remarks respecting the Sea Serpent,” *American Journal of Science and Arts* 2 (1820): 147–64; William Crafts, *The Sea Serpent; or, Gloucester Hoax: A dramatic jeu d’esprit in Three Acts* (Charleston, 1819). While the Gloucester sea serpent seems to have escaped the attention of modern professional historians of culture, society, and science, two useful secondary works provide information for the interested scholar. Graham J. McEwan provides a rather superficial account in *Sea Serpents, Sailors, and Skeptics* (London, 1978). An older but excellent piece of research is Rupert Thomas Gould’s *The Case for the Sea Serpent* (New York, 1934). Ron Westrum offers a sociologist’s perspective on sea serpents and their observers in “Knowledge about Sea-Serpents” in Roy Wallis, ed., *On the Margins of Science: The Social Construction of Rejected Knowledge*, Sociological Review Monograph 27 (1979): 293–314. All students of sea serpents are indebted to that masterpiece of eccentricity that lives between the covers of A. C. Oudemans’s *The Great Sea-Serpent: an Historical and Critical Treatise, with Reports of the 187 Appearances (including those of the appendix), the Suppositions and Suggestions of Scientific and non-Scientific Persons, and the Author’s Conclusions* (London, 1892).

11. *Boston Weekly Messenger*, 21 Aug. 1817.

12. *Memoirs of the Wernerian Natural History Society* 1 (1808–1810), 431–41.

13. Eric[h] Pontoppidan, *Natural History of Norway*, trans. Andreas Berthelson (London, 1755).

14. Silliman extracted a number of depositions from witnesses who saw the Weston Meteor trace an arc across the New England sky in December, 1807, and the Wernerian Society conducted its investigation of the Stronssa carcass along similar lines, even to the point of commissioning sketches of the animal based on the testimony of witnesses—in the manner of a police artist. Pontoppidan’s description was the most frequently cited in the contemporary literature:

The head of this sea-serpent, which it held more than two feet above the surface of the water, resembled that of a horse. It was of greyish colour, and the mouth was quite black and very large. It had large black eyes, and a long white mane, which hung down to the surface of the water. Besides the head and neck, we saw seven or eight folds, or coils, of this snake, which [?] very thick, and as far as we could guess there was a fathom’s distance between each fold.

Quoted in Gould’s *The Case for the Sea Serpent*, 24–27. Taking this passage from

Oudemans's *The Great Sea Serpent* (122–24), Gould claims that Pontoppidan's English edition is similar.

15. *Report of a Committee of the Linnæan Society of New England relative to a large Marine Animal supposed to be a Serpent, seen Near Cape Ann, Massachusetts in August 1817* (Boston, 1817), 1–22. John C. Greene observes in *American Science in the Age of Jefferson* that the Linnæan Society was merely another product of the “network of Harvard-bred literati” (74–75) who dominated New England intellectual life in the early nineteenth century; but for a more finely textured view of the Society and its activities, see Peter Joseph Heaney, “Smiting the Edge of Luckless Rock: Geological Stagnation in Early Nineteenth-Century Boston” (Honors Thesis, Harvard University, 1984). Unless otherwise noted, I am indebted to Heaney for my account of the Linnæan Society.

16. Constitution and Minutes of the Linnæan Society of New England, 1814–1830, Archives of the Boston Museum of Science, as quoted in Heaney, “Smiting the Edge,” 24.

17. Letters and Receipts concerning the Linnæan Society, 1815–1818, 7, Archives of the Boston Athenæum, as quoted in Heaney, “Smiting the Edge,” 26.

18. Constitution and Minutes of the Linnæan Society, 18 June 1817; quoted in Heaney, “Smiting the Edge,” 24.

19. *Report*, 2.

20. *Report*, 38, 40, 43, 46. It will become clear that Nash *did* shape the testimony of the witnesses, though it is difficult to know whether or not his actions were deliberate. The Society's “questions,” published in the *Report* seem neatly to frame the various accounts.

21. *Ibid.* In *The Case for the Sea Serpent*, Gould also questions the independent testimony of the individual witnesses and calls attention to the fact that nearly every deposition opens with the statement that the observer has seen a “strange marine animal,” which he “believed to be a serpent” (54).

22. *Report*, 24–26.

23. Recall that von Ferry stated, “we saw seven or eight folds, or coils, of this snake, which [were] very thick, and as far as we could guess there was a fathom's distance between each fold.” This observation provides a formula for computing the length of the Gloucester serpent at a minimum of forty-eight feet, which Nash exceeded, but he also admitted that his judgment was imperfect, “not having been much accustomed to looking through a glass” (34).

24. *Report*, 26–27. Here, at least, the Committee exercised caution in claiming a unique status for the Gloucester beast by appending a footnote that in effect reversed its conclusion: “when the head was elevated from the water, the white colour of the neck, or the spray of the sea, might possibly be mistaken for a mane” (113).

25. One witness who was distinctly reluctant to come forward was Thomas Handasyd Perkins, the “Merchant Prince of Boston.” Perkins traveled to Gloucester in August for the express purpose of viewing the animal, and this wish was satisfied on 18 August. Peering through a “fine glass” over a distance varying from nearly two miles to within one-third of a mile, he ascertained that the creature was horned, that it moved in a vertical motion like a caterpillar, exhibited bunches, and extended at least forty feet in length. “Fully satisfied that the reports in circulation, though differing in details, were essentially correct,” he deferred any public statement until 1848, although he wrote out a full description in 1820. Perkins's reluctance to speak out may have been rooted in a shrewd sense of the consequences of such an utterance. He admitted as much to the English geologist Charles Lyell during the latter's visit to the United

States in 1845. As Lyell recalled the story, "after the year 1817, every marvelous tale was called in the United States a snake story; and when Colonel Perkins went to Washington twenty years ago [c. 1825] and was asked if he had ever seen the sea serpent, he answered that he was one of the unfortunate individuals who saw it himself." Charles Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of North America*, 2 vols. (New York, 1849) 1: 113. Perkins's letter appeared in the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 25 Nov. 1848. Gould provides a lengthy excerpt in *The Case for the Sea Serpent*, 45–47.

26. *Report*, 46.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.* Cuvier apparently refers here to the artistic convention of representing serpents arrayed in vertical undulations.

29. *Report*, 46, 43–44.

30. *Report*, 50.

31. Bentley, 29 Sept. 1817, *Diary*, 4: 481. Bentley refers here to Erasmus Darwin. Oudemans provides an excerpt from a 13 Nov. 1817 letter from Edward Everett in Paris to the German physiologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach in Göttingen. Everett writes, "I [have] begun to collect a full account of [the serpent] out of 300 American Newspapers, which I intended for You, but as I hear that a pamphlet, on the subject, is being prepared by our Linnæan Society, which will contain depositions made on Oath, I have preferred waiting, till this appears" (192). Everett certainly was aware that many accounts already had appeared. Demonstrating how swiftly information traveled from the United States to European scholars, Everett referred to a 25 Oct. 1817 letter from his brother which gives an account of the capture of *Scoliophis* in Gloucester.

32. David Humphreys, *Letters from the Hon. David Humphreys, F.R.S. . . . to the Rt. Hon. Sir Joseph Banks . . . Containing some Account of the Serpent of the Ocean, frequently seen in Gloucester Bay* (New York, 1817) 1: 45–46. The career of David Humphreys (1751–1818) was long and varied. Humphreys's poetical career, if not of uniform merit, at least placed him among the first men of letters in the early Republic, and he enjoyed considerable public celebrity both as a Federalist of the Washington school and as writer of patriotic verse. For a useful and concise account of his life, see Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone, eds., *Dictionary of American Biography*, 20 vols. (New York, 1928–1936), 9: 373–75, as well as Franklin Bowditch Dexter, *Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Yale College*, 6 vols. (New York, 1885–1912), 3: 414–20.

33. David Humphreys, "On a New Variety in the Breeds of Sheep," *Philosophical Transactions* (1813): 88–95.

34. Frederick Hall to Benjamin Silliman, June [n.d.] 1807, Silliman Family Papers, Yale University.

35. Humphreys, *Letters from the Hon. David Humphreys, F.R.S.*, 21–23.

36. *Ibid.*, 27, 41, 36.

37. *Ibid.*, 18, 39–40.

38. *Ibid.*, 80. Humphreys wryly admitted that the search was conducted with "all the eagerness which can be inspired by curiosity mingled with love of money and glory" and claimed that, within his own hearing, a man had offered the sum of \$50,000 for the great serpent's carcass "which," added the shrewd Yankee, "would be more than reimbursed by the bare exhibition of the *skin* properly preserved" (79–80).

39. *Ibid.*, 37, 55–56, 83.

40. Bentley, 10 Aug. 1818, *Diary*, 4: 539.

41. Nathan Hale, *Boston Weekly Messenger*, 10 Sept. 1818.

42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. The sketch produced by James Prince after the Nahant sighting and reproduced in the 2 Sept. 1819 *Boston Weekly Messenger* perfectly illustrates the phenomenon described in Rich's account.
45. *Boston Weekly Messenger*, 2 Sept. 1819.
46. Constantine S. Rafinesque, "Dissertation on Water Snakes, Sea Snakes, and Sea Serpents," *American Monthly Magazine and Critical Review* 1, 6 (Oct. 1817): 431-35.
47. Ibid. Though coincidental, he came fairly close. Under the modern classification, a *pelamyd* is a young tuna.
48. Henri de Blainville, "Sur un nouveau genre de Serpent, *Scoliophis*, et le Serpent de mer vue en Amerique en 1817," *Journal de physique* 56 (1818): 299.
49. Blainville, "Sur un nouveau genre de Serpent," 299-301.
50. *Boston Weekly Messenger*, 26 Aug. and 2 Sept. 1819.
51. This statement may be of doubtful attribution. George P. Merrill, in his pioneering *Contributions to the History of American Geology* (Washington, 1906), succinctly paraphrases the comments by early science historian G. Brown Goode. Goode "discredits the authenticity of the report, regarding it one of the millions of slanders to which Jefferson was subjected in those days" (217). Still, Jefferson's antipathy toward the notion that stones should fall from the sky is well documented in a letter to Andrew Ellicott dated Oct. 1805 (quoted in Greene, *American Science in the Age of Jefferson*, 148), and he certainly knew of the widely distributed Silliman account.
52. William Dandridge Peck, "Some Observations on the Sea Serpent," *Memoirs, American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 4 (1819), [91].
53. William Crafts delivered the 1817 Phi Beta Kappa Address at Commencement. For a brief biography, see Samuel Gilman's preface to *A Selection in Prose and Poetry from the Miscellaneous Writings of the Late William Crafts* (Charleston, 1828) or the biographical entry in *Appleton's Cyclopædia of American Biography*, ed. James Grant Wilson and John Fiske, 7 vols. (1888), 1:764.
54. Crafts, *The Sea Serpent*, 13, 9, 30. The play premiered in the Charleston Theatre on 12 May 1819 and was performed again on 2 May 1821. See William Stanley Hoole, *The Ante-bellum Charleston Theatre* (Tuscaloosa, 1946), 195.
55. Ibid., 9, 10.
56. Ibid., 22.
57. Ibid., 17, 18. For biographical background on Zerah Colburn see *Appleton's Cyclopædia*, 1: 682.
58. Crafts, *The Sea Serpent*, 18, 34; and *A Selection of Prose and Poetry*, ix.
59. *The Journal of Gideon Mantell, Surgeon and Geologist*, ed. E. Cecil Curwen (London, 1940), 283.